

A
LETTER
TO THE
IRISH PARLIAMENT,
ON THE
INTENDED BILL
FOR LEGALIZING
MILITARY LAW.

There is no sure foundation set on blood.

KING JOHN.

—D U B L I N:—

PRINTED AND SOLD BY THE BOOK-SELLERS.

1799.



A
L E T T E R
TO THE
IRISH PARLIAMENT, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

IN common with most of my countrymen, I have looked with indifference to the adoption or rejection of an Union. And in common with them, I now feel the utmost alarm and anxiety at the proposal of that bill, which is, I find, to precede and ensure the success of that measure. Shall I confess, and are not my fears well founded? that I do not hope that you will reject this bill: I do not dare to expect that you will refuse your assent to this act of extermination, though you have refused it to an Union—and I lament that refusal—I deprecate that opposition, which has irritated the Government, and will not prevent the measure: I lament, that you did not let us receive Union, without adding to its persecution; and that you did not let us sink into oblivion, without an useless struggle; which, while it rivets our fetters, steepens them in blood. Is your conduct to be for ever marked by incongruity? and are the last acts of an Irish Parliament, to record at once its utility

tility in opposition, and its depravity in submission, to the will of the English Minister? Are you in the same session, to make a feeble attempt to assert the independence of your country, and to assent to the act; which destroys that independence for ever?

I might, and I should have some hopes, that you would reject this measure, from the conviction that it preceded an Union. If I did not know that its name and tenor, will ensure it many partizans, even among the opposers of Union—if I did not know, that Parliament has been in the habit of adopting measures of coercion, without considering whether they were necessary, or whether they must not be injurious. Rebellion is a word of terrific sound—Government knows, it is but necessary to mention it, to induce a compliance with any measure, however preposterous; but it behoves the Parliament not to believe, without investigation, every rumour circulated by state policy—It would be humane, it would be wise, to distinguish between the offending and the innocent—and not again, to let loose extermination on a whole nation, for the misconduct of a very small part. If rumour is to be attended to, I will tell the Parliament the rumour which I have heard, and I will pray them to investigate into the truth of it. I have heard, and I have heard it with circumstances which incline me to afford it some credit, that the excesses committed in Connaught, are not imputable to the unfortunate natives—that they are imputable alone to the yeomanry and army there. It has been asserted, that thirteen men were apprehended in the act of houghing cattle, who proved to be yeomen; and that the army refused their assistance to apprehend offenders; under the pretext that they had orders not to give it. If such should be the truth, the inference is but too clear—I shall not take up your time, or insult your understandings, by making one. But
I ask

I ask it from you, before you devote your countrymen to destruction, to examine on what grounds you do it—to reflect whether you are suppressing insurrection, or oppressing innocence? I would wish you to consider too, what advantages are to result from coercion, if unhappily insurrection still exists? You have tried it long, you have tried it unremittingly—have you ever found it successful?

You had a system of coercion handed down to you from your forefathers; you have enlarged it—what has been the result? Has peace arisen from persecution, or content from oppression?—No; the people have groaned under the oppression—they have withered under, and resisted the persecution. You have seen them discontented—have you removed the grievances? You have enacted new laws, each more oppressive than the last; you have driven them from discontent, to rebellion. Ignorance and superstition were receding from your land—you have recalled them; you have made them the inheritance of Irishmen; you have sought to make them their only birth-right.

But have you ever tried conciliation; have you ever attempted amelioration?—Never. From the first moment that an English foot pressed this ground, to the present, the system has been a system of cruelty, untinged with mercy.

And when, or where has persecution ever succeeded? At what period, or in what place, have the persecuted become converts to the sentiments of their persecutors? Persecution has made many martyrs; but it never has made one convert, and it never will—the nature of man resists it; the feelings implanted by the God of Justice, revolt against it. Has conciliation ever been adopted as policy, unsuccessfully? too seldom resorted to, but always effectual.

Would

Would it not be prudent in Parliament to try the effect of some lenient measures? At least, will it not be better for them not to enact any new sanguinary laws? You profess yourselves enemies to an Union—will you avow yourselves friends to annihilation? And are you not convinced, that if you accede to the one, the other will follow? How are you to oppose an Union, when you have armed Government with powers to enforce it? Do you suppose, that by limiting yourselves to the simple opposition of one measure, you will succeed? You must repel every attack, you must watch every movement, that leads to the accomplishment of it. If you allow your foundations to be undermined, your resources destroyed; you must expect to see the baseless fabric of Irish independence sink.

I would wish to suppose you not inclined to this work of extermination. I wish to suppose you rather mislead, than sanguinary; but I own, that my wishes are not always supported by my reason; and that, while I would throw the ignominy, and the guilt of all those measures which curse and desolate the land! upon the English Minister and his tools; much, too much of both, revert to the Irish Parliament. Without the concurrence of the Irish Parliament, the power^d of the English Minister would have been innoxious; against the wishes of the Irish Parliament, it would have been impotent. I do not say that it will—I much fear that the period for Parliament to assert its independence, is past; I fear that Parliament has formed the tomb of its own independence, and the liberty of the country. An independent Parliament cannot exist in an enslaved country: the liberties of one, and the independence of the other, must exist or expire together.

But if your wishes, or your misguided policy; shall induce you to continue the system of devastation;

if

if you determine still to encrease, and never to diminish, the sufferings of your countrymen: you must indeed exterminate—you must destroy, not simply 400,000 men, you must destroy 4,000,000 of people—you must annihilate not only the present, but the growing generation—you must sweep off the earth; not Irishmen alone, but Irish women, and Irish children! It is not enough that you tear the father from his family! the man from his country! if you leave the wife to weep her husband, the children to lament their father: you leave encreasing enemies to oppression; you add to the spirit of patriotism, the desire of vengeance.—Will the woman whose husband has been torn from her, forget how she has been deprived of him? Will she not seek revenge? Too surely she will—she will support her misery, in the hope of retribution; she will teach it to her children; she will entail it on them with her blessing—and when the moment arrives to seek this vengeance: she will nerve the arm of her son, and animate his heart, by the recital of his father's sufferings, and his father's fate.—The woman will forget that she is a mother, in remembering that she is no longer a wife! and the tear of maternal affection, suppressed by the remembrance of unavenged injuries: she will, with the unmoistened eye of corroded despair; send her only hope into the field of danger, to seek revenge—Will the boy forget that his father loved liberty? Will he not learn to love it too? He will imbibe the love of it with his mother's milk—he will en hale it from her sighs; it will be consecrated by her tears—his young and feeble hand will grasp the engine of liberty and vengeance; his beating heart, and fervid imagination; anticipate the moment of resistance—and to repress oppression, and to seek liberty; will seem a duty, not less imposed by filial affection, than by patriotism—Like the young Hanibal, he will be
sworn

sworn at the altar of patriotism and vengeance—led by his mother's enthusiasm, guided by his father's spirit, to that altar, he will swear, and he will feel; eternal enmity to the oppressors of his country, to the destroyers of his father.

Pause, I beseech you, before you sign the mandate of destruction; before you commit yourselves against your country; before you entail on your children the curses of their countrymen. Before you is an awful precipice—if you advance you are lost; turn into the plains of peace; listen to the voice of humanity; weigh well what you are doing; and in a moment of such import, forget the trifling considerations of self-interest: or estimate them fairly, and they will teach you the policy of justice and moderation: they will shew you the folly, the wickedness of seeking to perpetuate prejudice, to rule by cruelty;—they will tell you, that you cannot divide a people, whom you have taught to unite.

As well might you seek to stem the impetuous ocean with a mound of sand; as hope to confine the current of public opinion, and public wishes, by making it criminal to think, and punishable to wish: as well may you seek to calm the raging winds of Heaven, by bidding them be still; as hope to limit the human understanding, by penal restrictions.

If penal laws are to restore peace, are there not enough of them? Have you not one for every offence that can be committed, or imagined? Have you not six of your own creation? But they have proved inefficient to tranquillize a distracted country; they have irritated and inflamed the public mind—you know this; you feel this: but instead of repealing, or correcting those avowed sources of public discontent; you enact a new one, more grievous, more oppressive; than any which at present exist. In this one act, you combine all the horrors of unlimited

mitted monarchy, and unrestricted licentiousness; you make a soldiery the judges, and the executioners of your countrymen; you wrest from those countrymen, even the shadow of protection from lawless insult; you persecute, because you have injured them; and you hate them, because you feel that you have given them cause to hate you.

But do you expect any thing from persecution, different from what has always attended it? You do not, you cannot; you consent to the measure, because you think it consistent with your own interest; and to this motive, you submit every principle of justice, every sentiment of humanity. As individuals, you are many of you liberal; most of you well informed: as legislators, your conduct is marked by illiberality, and seems the result of ignorance. From your private lives, and private characters, a bigotted attachment to any form of religion, is not imputable to you; yet you retain a code disgraceful to humanity, and inconsistent with justice, because the Minister commands it—and if he commanded it, you would heap penalties and punishments on the Protestant Ascendancy, with the same facility that you retain them on the Catholic Religion.

But reflect on where and what you are; reflect that you are in civilized Europe, in the latter end of the eighteenth century; that you are senators of a country called independent—and if this act passes, ask yourselves what you will be? Your names and your conduct will not be unmarked in history; you are probably the last Parliament of Ireland—as such you will be known, and your actions canvassed. The last Parliament of Ireland—Futurity will ask why you were the last, and history will most faithfully answer—And is it to be recorded of this last Parliament, that their last act, in the last year of the eighteenth century, was to annul every protection to their country-

men, and to legalize the more than inquisitorial cruelty of military law, and military licentiousness. Is it thus you wish to be known to posterity? Is it thus you wish to be known to yourselves? When the mists of prejudice and passion are dispelled; when unclouded reason dwells on the past, and sits as censor on the measures, and the motives: when the war of interests has ceased, and selfishness no longer represses justice—you will judge of your own conduct, as your countrymen now judge it. Not more do they now deprecate, than you will then despise it—you will review it with accuracy; you will censure it, almost with severity: and in the indignation which you feel against the action, you will forget that you were yourselves the actors: and wonder at the blindness, the folly, or the depravity which adopted *this measure*—nor will the moment of reflection be delayed long; and the moment of feeling will arrive very soon.

When this bill has passed, and an Union is accomplished; when each of you, no longer legislators, but private individuals, returns to his home, through a country ravaged and desolated, under the sanction of *this military law*—will the journey be a cheering one? And will the heart that has been sickened, and every human heart must sicken, at such sanguinary scenes; expand and animate; when it returns to that home, which rises amidst the execrations and lamentations of a suffering peasantry? when the village blazes, and the cries of its inhabitants vibrate on the ear—will not conscience whisper, *I have sanctioned this*? Believe me the moment of bitter, though unavailing repentance, will come—it will come when your interest no longer clash with those of your countrymen; and when divested of your power, by the superior power of the Minister, you will know what it is to be impotent; you may feel what it is to be oppressed;

oppressed—you may become the victims of that unlimited power with which you are about to invest Government—the shaft aimed against the liberties of your country, may recoil on your own breasts; it may wound you through your children; it may pierce you in every dearest tie. Each of you may see your son, the child of your expectation, a victim to *this military law*—while he is dragged from your arms—while you part for ever, the blow that severs you, will strike on your heart, and tell you—you too *sanctioned this*.

And if this measure passes, it will indeed be your last act as a Legislative Body—for as to the Union, it is not to be considered as your measure; you would oppose it if you could; you will accept it, because you must—to you therefore does not attach any of the responsibility of that, farther than as your previous conduct has enabled the Minister to force it. Had you foreseen that all your compliances, your excessive exertions of power, would have ended in this; I do believe you would have acted differently. You would not, on the destruction of the liberties of your country, have laid a foundation for the destruction of your own immunities. Had you known that instead of rising or falling with Britain, you were to rise or fall with Ireland, Ireland would not now be in the state to which you have reduced her. Had you known when you refused Parliamentary Reform and Catholic Emancipation, that an Union was to be the consequence of that refusal, you would have conceded both measures, not to the wishes of your countrymen, not to justice, but to your own interest. Had you felt, when in compliance with the wishes of the Minister, you passed the Convention, the Insurrection, the Indemnity bills: and every other bill that was aimed against the vital principle of Liberty; that they were to injure, not your country alone,

alone, but yourselves: you would have rejected them with indignation; you would have treated them with contempt: and we should then have heard, as we now hear; animated expressions of public spirit, and glowing declarations of attachment to national honor, and national independence. We might perhaps have heard too, of the imprescriptible rights of the people; and had it been ascertained that the adoption of those laws would be followed by Union, the Minister would have been told; that Parliament was constituted to protect, not to oppress a people; that it could not abrogate their rights, or alienate their independence—and such language might then have been used, (and it would have been the language of salvation to the country). There was then something on which to found the superstructure of Liberty—the people were oppressed, grossly oppressed; but they were not then totally enslaved—a little concession, a little amelioration would have made them men—would have contented them. There were many abuses to reform, but they might have been reformed; there were many grievances to redress, but they might have been redressed. Now, when abuses are piled on abuses, and grievances heaped on grievances, with what will the people be contented? Let Parliament answer that question; let it revise its statutes—and then let it answer with what the people *ought* to be content. It would then have been the language of wisdom; it is now the language of unfeeling mockery. To talk to a people of preserving their rights, when you know that you have not left them one; to tell them that they shall have a separate Legislature, to protect their liberties, when their liberties are all extinguished!—it is like telling a man, that you will most carefully keep the casket for him, from which you have yourself taken every gem!

Thinking

Thinking thus of your former conduct, it may excite your wonder that I should now address you, and indeed I almost wonder at it myself; but there is in the most hopeless situation, a something of hope remaining; and while an effort can be made, however weak, I deem it criminal to remain inactive. I would wish to press on your attention the impolicy of adopting this bill; I fear it is useless to dwell on the criminality of it; I would wish you to be perfectly aware, that if you pass it, you must accede to the Union. I would wish you to remember, that this bill is solely the result of your opposition to that measure. If you had consented to it in the first instance, military law would not have been deemed necessary; but you raised resistance to it; you encouraged county meetings; you received addresses; and you talked with senatorial propriety, of obeying the instructions of your constituents. It was a new sound to the People, and to the Government; both thought it imported much more than you really meant by it. The people gave you credit for sentiments that you did not feel, and for intentions that you have not fulfilled; the Government feared that you had begun to see what you ought to do, and that you intended adhering to the conduct which you declared you would adopt; it feared that you were awakening from the deep sleep of venality, and that you had thrown off the torpor of corruption. But it has one infallible sophoric to lull the virtue of the Parliament, rebellion—and for this, discontent is created, or encouraged; for this the complaints of misery are swelled into the menaces of defiance: and the feeble form of discontent, enlarged to the gigantic magnitude, and gifted with the terrific strength of general insurrection. Government cannot avow that it seeks to declare military law against the Parliament; therefore

therefore it must be against the People—and Parliament is made the oftensable agent of that measure which is in reality aimed against itself. But there must be something on which to found, this exceeding of legal power; there must be some pretext for the revival of this measure, which the present Viceroy so entirely discountenanced, so pointedly reprobated, when it was considered as the interest of Government to appear merciful. Hence the connivance at the depredations of common robbers; hence the refusal of additional guards to the mail-coaches; but for these depredations the country must be proclaimed. Cattle are houghed in Connaught, either by the yeomanry, or by a very small number of the misguided, unfortunate peasantry. And for this the whole island is to be declared in a state of rebellion. But where does this rebellion exist? You are yourselves assembled from every part of the country; you are as competent to judge, as any hireling of government. Does it rage in the North, or in the South, or in the East? If it really exists in Connaught, and I much doubt it, and if military law is the efficient method of subduing it, why not proclaim Connaught alone? Why put all the rest of the country out of the ban of civil law? Why denounce vengeance and devastation on the whole, for the offences of a part? Surely you must be convinced, that it is not against the country alone, that military law is intended, but against you, against your opposition to the Union. Pass this law, and if you object to the other; if you are not forced to consent to it, your objection will be made null, you will be dissolved; and government will secure a majority in the new Parliament; reject this bill, and you may resist the other: this cannot be forced on you, the other certainly will.

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I do not call on you to make sacrifices to your country; I know that the Gothic period of making sacrifices to patriotism, is past, and I am sure the Irish Parliament will not revive it—I speak to you as men accustomed to consider your own interest. In this instance, happily it coincides most evidently with that of your country—and from this alone I still hope. If you should pass this act, you sign your own fate; the country may rise above the ruin which you have prepared for her, but you never will—4,000,000 of Irish People may yet be happy, but the Irish Parliament will have sunk for ever. I speak to you prophetically, the prophecy of unbiassed reason, and unsophisticated truth: do not reject the counsel, because you are unacquainted with the adviser. I address you for the last time—and with all the solemnity of a last address, the softened feelings of an eternal separation; I conjure you to arrest your hand, and not to consign your country and yourselves to unnecessary destruction. A little time, and you will not have the power either to injure or serve that devoted country—Oh yet leave it something, for which it may learn not to curse your duration, and rejoice in your extinction—let your last act be rather an act of mercy than of cruelty; so may your memory be hallowed by the forgiveness and regret of your country—if your Parliamentary career is over; do not let its termination be marked by cruelty—if the legislative sun of this horizon is to set for ever; do not make it set in *blood*—let its last rays shine with the purified brightness of penitent conciliation; let its last beams diffuse the vivifying warmth, which its meridian splendor denied.—



